

AFRICA'S EDUCATION CENTURY

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It is not just a pleasure and a real privilege, to be asked to speak at this conference - it is very reassuring. You see, there are a lot of reasons that British people decide to come and live in South Africa.

For some it's wanting to see the sun more than a handful of times every year; for others it's deciding to drink their favourite South African wine for half the cost in surroundings that are four times as beautiful; yet more come on holiday to South Africa fall in love with the richness of its culture and optimistic energy of its people; and maybe, after the unexpected events of 2016 that have left some British people feeling profoundly uncomfortable in their country, there will be a new category and new surge of emigrants - rugby fans who cannot get used to watching a team that wins such a high percentage of matches.

But whatever the most popular reasons, mine was probably one of the few visa applications - so far - motivated by a belief that the greatest potential for meaningful innovation in education lay in Africa, and that South Africa could be the engine room of that change.

So it's nice to see you all here today, because that means at least some of you agree with me, or are kind enough to pretend that you do.

But when you take a look at the list of the speakers and attendees for today's conference - local EdTech entrepreneurs and principals of new low cost private schools mixing with CEOs of established education companies and senior technology staff from major international corporations - it is clear that innovation in education is in fact fast becoming a cause that is attracting the biggest talents and brightest minds.

And rightly so. It is 18 years since Thabo Mbeki, in a speech barely half an hour from here, declared that the twenty first century should be the African century. And since then there has been some remarkable progress on the African continent. Real average incomes have risen over 50 per cent, life expectancy has increased by nearly 20 per cent and infant mortality has nearly halved. While we must never be complacent and always retain our urgency in the war on poverty and disease - we should also be clear that we are winning it. We must now also turn our energies to the remaining question we need to get right if the twenty first century is really to become the African century: education.

THE REAL TRAGEDY IS THAT WE DO NOT GIVE THEM THE TOOLS TO NEGOTIATE THIS NEW WORLD

Because if there is one issue that even extreme Africa optimists like me cannot put a positive spin on- yet - it is education.

Today's children of primary school age will shape the continent beyond 2050.

But According to UNESCO, something like 30 million of them are not in school, and half have never been to school. This is not just a question of failed states but of some of Africa's richest countries - at the last count there were over a million children out of school in each of Kenya, Cote D'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Ethiopia.

A further 30 million are estimated to be in school but not learning: a lethal cocktail of under-funding, under-skilled or entirely absent teachers and subterranean expectations meaning children leave school bereft of basic literacy or numeracy.

Turning the question closer to home - South Africa is the world's 30th biggest and Africa's most industrialised economy. Since that Mbeki speech incomes are up 30% and infant mortality is down 38%. But how will we continue that trajectory in the next generation, when 58% of grade 4s can't read for meaning ? When two thirds of 14 year olds can't reach basic international standards in science

and Maths? When 60% of students fail matric, and among those who pass it the university drop out rate is 50% ?

This problem is especially urgent because if we keep doing things the same way, we won't get the same results; things will get worse - as population pressures stretch already thin resources, competition from other countries intensifies, and the demands of modern economies and societies get more taxing.

Business as usual is comprehensively failing in education in South Africa and across the continent. We have got to do things differently, and seize on the dynamism and optimism that is one of the African nations' most uniting and most enduring qualities.

THE EXTENSION OF OUR HOUSE CALLS FOR NEW AND ORIGINAL TACTICS

Improvements in African lives and societies have gone hand in hand with another notable trend since 1999: a sharp increase in indexes of Africans' economic freedom. Citizens in the 5 countries with the highest rating for economic freedom in Africa are 20% richer than the five with the lowest rating. The twin engines of human progress - free people and free enterprise along with

scientific and technological innovation - work as surely in Africa as anywhere else in the world, and we are beginning to discover that they work as surely in education as in any other area of life.

The conversations I've had over the last eighteen months with the teachers and entrepreneurs who are innovating in education in order to improve the countries that they love have taught me two important lessons - firstly, that the innovations that will work will be those built on the ground by little platoons working locally, and secondly that education innovation isn't an area where Africa needs to follow the rest of the world. It is an area where Africa can lead it.

One important part of this is a grass roots coalition of parents, principals and entrepreneurs banding together to create more affordable private schools as an alternative to failed public provision. Whether it is the schools run by Future Nation and Future Learn I had the pleasure of spending time in yesterday, or the brilliant provision I've previously witnessed at Spark, or what's done in Pioneer, Curro or others - we should welcome these innovators with the most open of arms.

Innovation, however, does not exist only in the private sector, and we should recognise that often the government schools that are the most effective are those with the most freedom to operate, like two

of my favourites - COSAT Academy and Chris Hani secondary in Khayelitsha.

The idealism of great teachers and sacrifice of committed parents are our two most powerful weapons to change education, and we must maximise the power and money that goes into their hands. Make them stronger, and their communities and the whole country will become stronger as well.

But while these innovations will help - especially in urban areas and especially with the emerging middle class - they will not be sufficient. If we wait until every family in every community has a high performing school that they can afford, children currently in Grade R will be great grandparents before this country, let alone this continent, gets the equality of opportunity we all believe to be a moral and economic imperative. And you won't be reaching any of the university or TVET students, or adult learners, who also desperately need our help.

IT ALWAYS SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, UNTIL IT IS DONE

And that is where technology comes in. Because at the heart of the remarkable improvements in African lives and societies over the last 20 years lie scientific and technological innovations that overcome seemingly insurmountable structural barriers, from mass vaccinations to instant mobile money payments.

If we want to overcome the roadblocks to reform that exist in African education, from the challenges of serving remote rural areas and the vicious circle that is under educated and under supported teachers, to crime, basic nutrition and parental illiteracy - then we need to look no further than the amazing Education Technology entrepreneurs that I've been speaking to and hosting at our events and in our cluster over the last year. But at the moment these entrepreneurs sorely lack the support and opportunities their talent and innovation richly deserve, and that are given to those innovating in other sectors and industries.

For example, Sea Monster Games have created a culturally neutral series of animations to help more people across Africa with financial literacy. So why isn't someone funding them to create something of the same quality for basic literacy, that means all children of whatever background and culture get a head start learning to read ?

A young woman in the Western Cape is trying to create a Khan Academy style platform that reduces costs and increases quality of

professional development for teachers and reaches those who want to improve in any school at any time. So why don't we get government and business combining to fund and support her initiative so that we enhance the potential of the most important adults in our education system ?

There is an online intervention called the Future Authoring programme that has reduced the university drop out rate in Holland and Canada by over 50% and boosted grades by over 25%. It's most effective with young black men. Why isn't it being used in every university in South Africa, and right across the continent ?

I could go on and tell you about the amazing cluster of Education Technology companies that we host at the Bandwidth Barn in Cape Town- Siyavula for open source Maths and Science, EdRo teaching Computer Science through robotics, Hyperion online training the next generation of coders, Ark and Instill using new freedoms to drive up standards in government schools.

Or I could talk about our EdTech meet up here in Joburg on 13 June, where local start ups like Grades Match, Clock Education, Tuta Me and CRPT will be presenting exciting new tech innovations.

But time is limited and these are only a few examples of the incredible movement of teachers, entrepreneurs and parents across the country trying to use technology to transform life chances.

And that is why I am starting, here in South Africa, the first Education Technology dedicated incubator programme on the African continent. Starting next month, we will select the entrepreneurs from right across Africa with the biggest ideas for technology in education, give them R 1M of support each including R 500k of direct funding and grow their ideas so they impact the education system at scale and raise standards and change lives across the country - and then take those ideas right across the continent.

A CORNER OF THE GLOBE OF WHICH ALL HUMANITY CAN BE PROUD

And such is the power and reach of technology, that if we all get behind these entrepreneurs and teachers then for them and their magnificent new innovations just raising standards in a single country or region is a goal that is not big enough or bold enough.

Because just as I believe it will not be centralised planning or big bureaucracies that harness the power of technology to improve education, nor will it be the most developed economies or big global institutions that create the innovations that transform it.

This is an area where I believe the developing world is going to lead the developed, and we here in South Africa can light a touch paper of innovation that spreads first across this continent and then across the world.

This could be the beginning of a century where Africa becomes the world's centre for an education revolution the way Europe once was for an industrial revolution.

A century that is truly the African century, because more and more Africans are educated - whether first time round or through a second chance - to access the incredible opportunities of life in the modern world.

A century where South Africa is looked upon as a global leader in technology and innovation, as a worthy peer by the world's most advanced economies and as a beacon of hope by the continent's most troubled societies.

A century where we prioritise education because it is never just a battle for one aspect of the economy and society for some of the people, but because education is always a battle for for the heart, soul and future of every corner of every society, for everyone.

And the more time I spend among entrepreneurs, teachers and parents in this country and across this continent, the more convinced I am that in this education century it is a battle we are going to win.

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Jamie Martin is partnering with CiTi to found Africa's first EdTech dedicated incubator, based in South Africa but open to entrepreneurs from across Africa. Our website is www.edtech.org.za